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ABSTRACT

A study of Hispanic students in predominantly minority high schools in five American cities found that parental expectations for a child's educational attainment are important to high school completion. Based on the survey responses of the Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central American students in that study, the following recommendations for policy and program planning are suggested: (1) statistical data should be collected by local, state, and national educational agencies that allow for disaggregation of Hispanics by origin; (2) parent involvement programs must target the language, educational, work, and child care needs of Hispanic parents; (3) since Hispanic parents may not have the formal education needed to tutor their children adequately or help with homework, efforts must be made to provide effective tutoring programs and to supply basic study materials, such as dictionaries, typewriters, and calculators; (4) the statistical data gathered on Hispanic urban high school students should be further developed as this cohort continues their educational careers. Statistical data are included on four graphs. A brief description of ASPIRA and its parent involvement projects is appended. (FMW)

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ASPIRA
Five Cities
High School
Dropout Study:
Focus on Parents

Written by Janice Petrovich, Ed.D., and James L. Parsons, M.S.

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The ASPIRA Five Cities High School Dropout Study

The ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study* is a two-year longitudinal survey of randomly selected Hispanic ninth grade students in seven predominantly minority high schools in five U.S. cities. The sample consists of 706 students from Chicago, Illinois; Miami, Florida; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Newark, New Jersey; and San Antonio, Texas. The survey design enabled students, and some of their parents, to respond to more than 300 specific variables focusing on the roles that community, family, school, and individual student characteristics play in students' decisions to drop out or stay in school.

This summary, *Focus on Parents,* is just a small portion of the rich data base available from the study.

Information on obtaining the larger report, *Characteristics of Hispanic High School Students,* or the data base itself is available on page 12 of this summary.

Focus on Parents

Half of all Hispanics living in the United States aged 25 or over--nearly 5 million people--have not finished high school.

Dropping out of high school has not always been that unusual in the United States. As late as 1947, fewer than half of those in the 18 to 21 year-old age group had completed high school. The proportion of 18-19 year-olds completing high school increased through the 1950s and, aided by the movements toward expanding educational opportunities for women and minorities in the 1960s, moved to more than seventy percent by the early 1970s. Then the growth rate flattened, and latest figures still show a high school completion rate hovering around the three-quarters mark for the entire population aged 25 and over.

High school completion rates are not uniform across all racial and ethnic groups. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, for those persons 25 years of age or older, more than three-fourths of all Whites and more than three-fifths of all Blacks have completed high school, but only about half of all Hispanics have high school diplomas.

Statistics are not answers; indeed, they only suggest other questions:

- Why do students drop out of school?
- Why are Hispanic students more likely than other racial or ethnic groups to drop out?
- What can be done to improve the chances for Hispanic students to complete high school?
- How can Hispanics catch up with the rest of the American population in educational attainment?

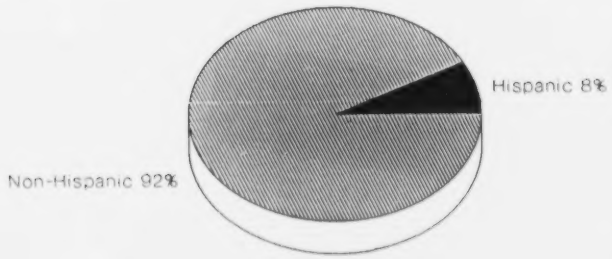
The ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study: Characteristics of Hispanic High School Students* takes an essential first step in unraveling the complex

questions of why some students stay in school while others drop out. This inquiry describes the individual, family, school, and community characteristics of Hispanic ninth grade students enrolled in predominantly minority high schools in major U.S. cities. Only by examining the complex interaction between these characteristics can we begin to understand the dropout phenomenon.

More than 700 Hispanic ninth grade students were randomly selected from seven high schools located in five of America's largest cities. The stratified sample design yielded student profiles for the four largest Hispanic groups in the United States: Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Central Americans. The ASPIRA report is the first educational study of urban high school students to consider the similarities and differences of students as members of these major Hispanic subgroups.

GRAPH I.

Mainland U.S. Population
March 1988



Data from U.S. Census Bureau, August 1988

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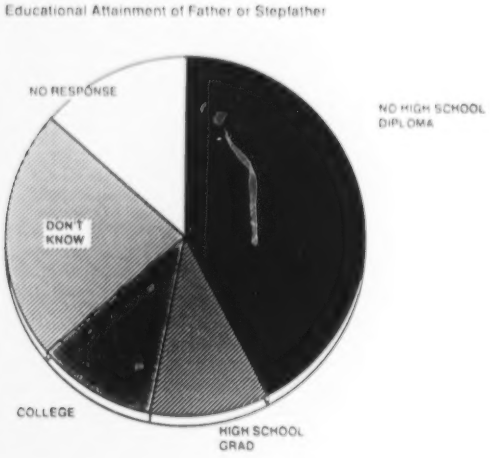
Study findings indicated that all Hispanics are not alike. Based on responses to more than 100 questions, these urban high school students are shown to differ by origin in individual, family, school, and community characteristics. Differences among the four Hispanic groups suggest that policies or programs that treat Hispanics as a homogeneous group may be hampered and possibly rendered ineffective or even counterproductive in their goal of keeping students in school.

For example, research on school dropouts has linked the characteristics of home and gamily with a student's tendency to drop out or stay in school. Parental expectations for a child's future educational attainment are important. The ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study* finds that Hispanic students believe that their parents expect them to finish high school and to get a better job than their parents. The students themselves want to finish high school, go to college, and have a professional career.

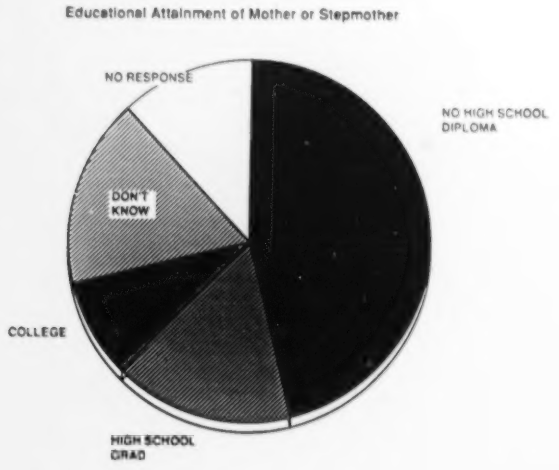
But are parental expectations and student dreams of the future enough to ensure success? While Hispanic parents, as all good parents, want the best for their offspring, there are barriers that lie between what is desired and what may be achieved. According to the ASPIRA report, 64.6% of the students report that their father or stepfather either did not complete high school, or that they do not know how much formal education he received. For their mothers and stepmothers, the percentage is 63.0%. In other words, nearly two-thirds of these Hispanic high school students do not have a clear parental role model for high school graduation. While the students say they want to have professional careers, they reported that only about 2.5% of their fathers or stepfathers, and less than 1% of their mothers or stepmothers, have professional occupations such as lawyers, doctors, or engineers. Cuban students were far more likely to report having professional parents than Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, or Central Americans, but not all Cubans are professionals.

Language may also serve as a barrier to success and high school graduation in English-speaking schools. A

GRAPH II.

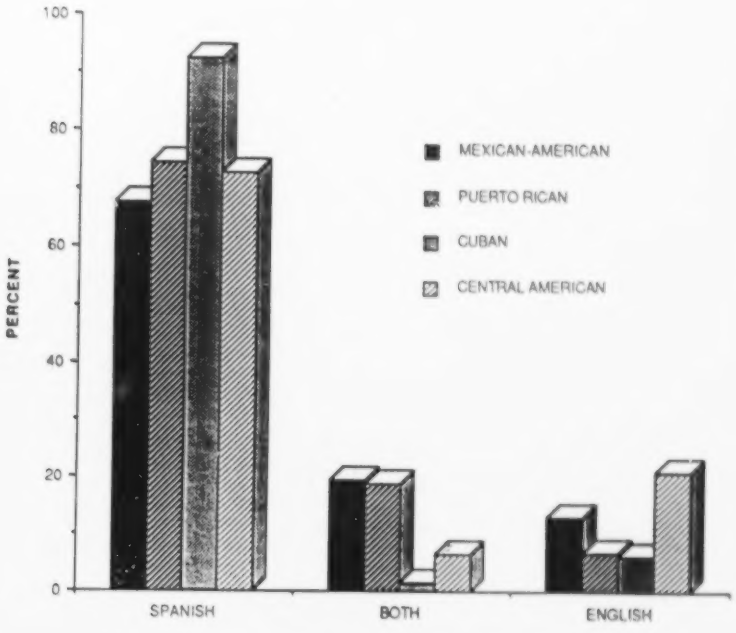


GRAPH III.



plurality of Central American students reported that they do not speak, read, or write English very well. This is in sharp contrast to the self-reported ability of students in the other three groups to communicate in English. The clear majority of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban students reported that they speak, read, and write very well in English. And while students in all four groups reported that their parents encourage them to learn both English and Spanish, for the majority of Hispanic parents, the preferred language of communication, and certainly the language of greatest comprehension, is Spanish.

GRAPH IV.



What are the implications of these parental characteristics? Parents of Hispanic students may want their children to succeed, they may want to be involved in their children's school activities, they may want to help them with homework, but factors identified in the ASPIRA study indicate barriers for parental involvement.

Many schools--even schools where a majority of students are neither White nor middle class--remain White, middle-class institutions. The language of the school is English. The schedule of the school is the Monday through Friday, eight-hour workday. This model does not fit the reality of Hispanic urban life, as reported in the ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study.*

Many Hispanic parents, who are blue collar or service workers, do not have the scheduling flexibility of white collar workers and professionals. Attending meetings or teacher conferences during the school day is impossible. Meetings, parent education classes, or conferences scheduled after the school day is over may be equally difficult for parents to attend due to younger children, second jobs, or the bone-aching fatigue of a day of physical labor preventing a trip from home to school.

Parents of urban Hispanic high school students encourage their children to learn English, get good grades, finish high schools, and get good jobs. The students reported that they look to their parents for advice on personal matters or school concerns, but not for help on their homework. Hispanic students report that their parents have rules concerning school grades. While students in all four Hispanic groups placed their mothers or stepmothers first among those who advice them to stay in school, their other responses indicate that their mothers are ill-equipped to do much more than encourage. Consider the frustration of a parent--herself a high school dropout--confronted with a question from a puzzled child about Algebra, Beowulf, or the Continental Divide.

The responses of urban high school students surveyed in the ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study* suggest a number of specific recommendations for policy and program planning to increase the numbers of Hispanic students who complete high school.

Recommendation One.

Data should be collected by Local, State, and National educational agencies that allow for the disaggregation of Hispanics by origin. At the very least, demographic data for Hispanic students should reflect students by Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Central American origin.

Recommendation Two.

Parent Involvement programs target the special needs of Hispanic parents. Programs not only must meet the special language needs of Hispanic parents, but also must consider limited education, inflexible work schedules, and child care.

Recommendation Three.

Since the parents of Hispanic high school students may not have the formal education to adequately tutor their children or help with homework, and many households lack basic resources for study aids, a special effort must be made to (1) provide effective tutoring programs and (2) supply basic study materials such as dictionaries, typewriters, and calculators. As a part of this recommendation, it is suggested that peer tutoring programs be thoroughly investigated as Hispanic students are likely to turn to good friends for help with their course work.

Recommendation Four.

The ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study: Characteristics of Hispanic High School Students* represents only a fraction of the data collected from students, their parents, and school archives as part of a three-year project to examine urban Hispanic students. With that in mind, it is of vital interest for a more complete understanding of

the Hispanic urban high school students to (1) use this database to develop further reports and (2) continue following this cohort of students throughout their educational careers.

Throughout the United States, large numbers of students leave the public schools before graduation from high school. School dropouts have been a perennial issue in education, but recently government, educators, the media, and the general public have shown a renewed interest in this problem. Leaders of business are concerned about a future work force ill-equipped to handle the demands of increasingly complex jobs.

High school dropout rates for Hispanic students range around the 50% mark in urban school districts around the United States. Growth rates of Hispanics in the United States, both from increasing immigration and high birth rates, suggest that both in absolute and relative numbers, more and more Hispanics will lack the most basic educational credential--the high school diploma.

Half a century ago, near the dawn of the second world war, the high school completion rate for all Americans was about the same as that of Hispanic today. Perhaps Hispanics will catch up with the rest of the United States population. Given another 50 years, perhaps Hispanic high school completion rates will approach three in four.

But if we don't work at it, perhaps not.

What Is ASPIRA?

The ASPIRA Association, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization which since 1961 has served and advocated on behalf of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth. With major programmatic efforts in leadership development and education, ASPIRA also conducts research and informs plicymakers on issues critical to Latinos. Its ten offices are located in five states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. ASPIRA is the oldest and largest Hispanic youth organization in the country. Its central mission is advancing the development of the Latino community. To fulfill that mission, it provides over 13,000 youth annually with the emotional, intellectual, and practical resources they need to remain in school and contribute to their community.

ASPIRA's Parental Involvement Efforts

The ASPIRA Association, Inc. Institute for Policy Research has been involved since its inception in assessing community needs and studying dropout prevention. Last year ASPIRA undertook a national demonstration project which combines these two pursuits. The project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, mobilizes the Hispanic community to improve their children's chances of educational success.

The two-year Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention (HCMDP) project focuses on creating community awareness and providing practical information to Hispanic parents to help them be more effective participants in their children's education.

The project is a collaborative effort between ASPIRA Associates and other Hispanic community based organizations. ASPIRA Associates in Miami, Florida; New York, New York; Camden, New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Carolina, Puerto Rico have been joined by the United Community Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the Intercultural Development Research Association in San Antonio, Texas; the Latin American Community Center in Wilmington, Delaware;

and, in Washington, D.C., a collaboration between the University of the District of Columbia and various church congregations.

The objectives of the HCMDP are to assist in the implementation by the Hispanic community of parent/community involvement strategies to reduce Latino dropouts by:

- training staff of local community organizations to work with parents and the community to curb Latino dropouts;
- promoting cooperation and collaboration among organizations that deal with Latino youth and families; and
- providing additional outreach tools to be disseminated in communities to both parents and policymakers.

The full 170-page report of the ASPIRA *Five Cities High School Dropout Study: Characteristics of Hispanic High School Students* is available from the ASPIRA Institute for Policy Research, 1112 16th Street, NW, Suite 340, Washington, DC 20036. The cost is $20, prepaid.

Data from the study are available on SPSS tapes or diskettes, and can be obtained for a nominal fee by writing to Dr. Ricardo Fernandez, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Campus Coordinator, M/D Programs, University of Wisconsin, Chapman Hall 301, P.O. Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201.